

# Little Calumet River and Floodplain Marsh Restoration at Hatcher Park and Marshalltown Marsh

## The Need: A River and Community Disconnected

For over a century, the West Branch of the Little Calumet River has been severely degraded. Once a meandering, vibrant waterway rich in wildlife and accessible to local communities, it has been dramatically altered by human intervention. The river's natural flow was reversed, channels were straightened, levees were built, and runoff from agriculture, industry, and residential areas polluted the water.

Today, more than 10 miles of river are confined within levees, reducing the footprint of floodplains and severely limiting habitat for fish and wildlife, while also diminishing recreational and cultural value for nearby communities. The Marshalltown Marsh Complex is our opportunity to restore what's been lost and return this river corridor to a place that supports both people and nature. This includes restoring flow to historic river channels, restoring quality floodplain habitat, and developing amenities to benefit the local and regional populace.



## Our Vision for Restoration

Audubon Great Lakes and the Little Calumet River Conservation Collaborative (LCRCC) — a coalition of environmental organizations, public agencies, and utilities — is advancing a bold, community-informed vision for ecological restoration and improved public access across the 2,500-acre West Branch of the Little Calumet River corridor. Since 2016, we've worked together to bring this vision to life, and now, we're focused on transforming 400

acres of the Marshalltown Marsh Complex in Gary, Indiana. The LCRCC consists of Audubon Great Lakes, Calumet Collaborative, City of Gary, Lake County Parks & Recreation, the Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission, The Nature Conservancy, NIPSCO, and The Wetlands Initiative.

The goals of the restoration project are to create access and recreational opportunities to residents, create and improve wetland habitats of the Little Calumet River, remove invasive species, and reintroduce native species to make Gary more resilient in the face of pollution and climate change. Located adjacent to the Marshalltown Terrace neighborhood and Hatcher Park, this restoration has the potential to improve habitat, enhance flood resilience, and create new nature-based opportunities for the community.

## **Undergoing Phase 1 of Restoration: Understanding the 60% Design Stage**

The project team worked with an engineering and design firm to develop a strong, vetted blueprint — but we're not finished yet.

The 60% design phase represents a significant milestone in the development of a restoration project where the project's core elements — including engineering plans, habitat restoration features, flood modeling, and site layout — are largely developed and clearly defined.

This level of design includes:

- Preliminary engineering drawings and specifications
- Detailed layout of river re-meandering and habitat features
- Initial hydrology and hydraulic modeling
- Cost estimates
- Preliminary regulatory and permitting considerations

## **What the 60% Design Delivers**

The current 60% engineering and design plans lay the foundation for:

- Restoring 1.6 miles of the Little Calumet River by re-aligning it with its historic meandering path.
- Reconnecting floodplain wetlands to improve water flow and raise the groundwater table.
- Creating a rich mosaic of habitats — including deep marshes, wet meadows, and oxbow ponds — to support native birds, fish, amphibians, and endangered species.
- Improving fish passage through culverts and reducing sediment buildup, making the river healthier and more resilient.

This design was developed by Environmental Consulting & Technology, Inc. (ECT) in collaboration with LCRCC, Indiana DNR's Lake Michigan Coastal Program, the Coastal States Organization, and is grounded in site assessments, community feedback, and prior U.S. Army Corps of Engineers studies.

## What Comes Next?

To move the restoration project forward, we will advance to the final design phase, which includes:

- 90–100% Design Completion: Final engineering details, construction drawings, and cost estimates will be refined based on additional feedback, permitting requirements, and site-specific conditions.
- Permitting and Approvals: Submitting formal applications for environmental and construction permits.
- Securing Construction Funding: Identifying and securing the financial resources needed to begin implementation.
- Community Feedback: Continuing conversations with residents, partners, and stakeholders to ensure the design reflects shared goals.

The 60% design is a strong foundation, and we will continue to engage local residents, community groups, and local government through a variety of events and workshops in the coming months and years.

## Habitat Benefits

Through this habitat restoration project, Audubon Great Lakes and partners are hoping to provide Gary residents with a win-win for birds and people. This restoration will create and enhance:

- 1.6 miles of re-meandered river with improved aquatic habitat and fish passage.
- 56 acres of deep marsh pond and slough habitat.
- 89 acres of wet meadow.
- 56 acres of hemi-marsh and oxbow pond.
- 2-acre oak savanna wildlife island.
- Invasive species management across the restoration area.

Target species include species that have significantly decreased or have been lost over time, including fish, waterfowl, state-endangered marsh birds, amphibians, and other wildlife.

## Community Benefits

We're not just restoring nature — we're restoring connection. The project will:

- Expand public access to Hatcher Park, Ironwood Park, the LCR Trail, and the Peppermint Playground.
- Activate a network of parks and trails as safe, vibrant spaces for the community to gather, recreate, and build lasting connections with nature and each other.
- Encourage regular community use, that will help shift the perception of these areas from overlooked or misused spaces to valued neighborhood assets and essential parts of the community.
- Create new recreation opportunities like hiking, birding, paddling, and fishing.
- Be shaped by ongoing community engagement to ensure it reflects the needs and vision of Gary residents.

## Understanding the Flood Impacts

Working with the community and getting feedback, the project team has found that flooding is a top concern for residents and local officials. Here's what the 60% design shows:

- No increased flood risk: The proposed changes will not raise the risk, frequency, or severity of flooding.
- Existing culverts and infrastructure limit some restoration potential, but our design works within these constraints.
- Reconnected floodplains will slow water during smaller events and provide storage — without impacting major flood events.
- We're actively exploring additional water carrying capacity at key locations and opportunities for culvert upgrades.

The remaining questions the project team is exploring include:

- Can these improvements reduce flood risk?
- Are municipalities open to culvert upgrades?
- How will maintenance and long-term management be funded?
- How do we phase and prioritize the work?
- How can community members and Gary residents benefit from this project?

## A Rare Opportunity to Restore What's Been Lost

The Marshalltown Marsh project is a generational opportunity to restore rare floodplain and riverine habitats — ecosystems that have nearly vanished from this region. It's a chance to invest in ecological health, community well-being, and climate resilience in Gary. The century-long degradation of the Little Calumet River has been a critical loss for both the

wildlife and people who once depended upon and enjoyed this unique natural resource. What was destroyed for expediency can now be restored with an effort enjoying broad-based support from the local community, conservationists, public utilities, and governmental organizations.

With broad support from partners, we are ready to move from design to action. Now, we need funding and public support to make this shared vision a reality. It's time to bring the Little Calumet River back to life — for wildlife, for community, and for future generations.

*The 60 percent design was developed in partnership with the Little Calumet River Conservation Collaborative (LCRCC), IN DNR Lake Michigan Coastal Programs, The Coastal States Organization (CSO), and Environmental Consulting & Technology, Inc. (ECT). The design builds off the site assessments and conceptual plans developed by the LCRCC as well as a previous study, conducted by the Chicago District, US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) under the Planning Assistance to States (PAS) Program Section 22 of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 1974 (Public Law 93-251) entitled, "[Little Calumet River Planning Assistance to States Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration at Heron Rookery, Martin Luther King South, Martin Luther King North and the Marshalltown Marsh Planning Report.](#)"*